

WALKING TOGETHER WITH DEPRESSION

Interview Vicki Rochow

“As parents we feel incredibly responsible for our kids and I have gone to that place “What did I do wrong as a mum?” Is it because I had depression and it was undiagnosed? Did I raise them so that they didn't have any coping mechanisms? Ultimately one of the most important things is we need to remain connected.”

Celia: In recent years it seems like depression, and mental health is on the rise. And we're particularly seeing it more in our children - but how do we know when it's depression or normal teenage angst? Today I'm talking with Vicki Rochow, a counsellor and a mum who has walked alongside her kid's depression as well as her own.

So Vicki how do we recognize when it is depression and not just “Oh they're having a teenage phase or a teenage day?”

Vicki: You kind of go “Oh well that sounds like a normal teenager.” You know, not getting out of bed, they retreat to their room and I can remember doing that as a kid too! Everyone has bad days. Everyone has a bad few days depending on what's going on but I think if you've noticed that their mood is really low, they've lost interest in things that used to make them happy, they've withdrawn from friends, they're very sad or perhaps more irritable than normal and it's a prolonged time, you know over two weeks, I think that's when you start to go hmm maybe something's not quite right here.

Celia: How do we know when to react?

Vicki: I think it's really important that if we notice that this has been going on for some time that we do approach them and just have a chat and share that you're really worried about them. I think just being really open to having a conversation with them. Really listening. Listening to understand what it is that they're going through.

Celia: How does listening to understand differ from other listening?

Vicki: I think when we really have to listen it's often inconvenient. It's usually a time when we don't have the time for listening. You know, you're in the middle of cooking tea or whatever. So I think you have to put whatever to the side and sit down and create a safe place that can help conversation. Whether that be sitting next to each other on the bench so you're together but not staring at them in the face and then really listening.

Celia: But how do we start that conversation?

Vicki: Asking open questions:

- How did that make you feel?
- What did that look like?
- When you said X Y Z, what do you mean?

Really just trying to nut into what it is that they're saying, so that you can really hear what the problem is. You kind of need to hold onto all those, I guess feelings of fixing things and solving problems and just really listen.

Celia: Gee that's hard!

Vicki: I would just help guide them in that to just think of one thing at a time. You know eating an elephant, one bite at a time. They just need to break it down and they need help to do that.

Celia: What if they're not talking?

Vicki: That's really difficult and not all of us have those close relationships with our children either. We can be quite fractured in that but I think if you can't get to that space then it's really important that you find them someone who can. Whether that be an auntie and uncle, football coach, a teacher that they feel close to that they can talk to. It's really important that they have someone older who can support them. The other thing is if you're really worried seek out a counselor or take them to the doctor and see if you can find some help that way. Don't give up

Celia: You've said you've had experiences of depression with your kids....

Vicki: and anxiety.

Celia: As a mum how do you navigate that?

Vicki: So as a parent, actually learning about stuff before you get to that space. Being prepared in case it happens and it may not be your children but it might be their friends or it could be a close friend of your own.

Celia: So what sorts of things have you done to prepare yourself?

Vicki: I guess walking my own journey. I've had depression as well so just walking my journey with that and knowing the ways people reacted or didn't react and how that felt for me personally.

Celia: Can you give me an example of that?

Vicki: Yeah. I guess sometimes you just want someone to just sit and listen and have empathy, not sympathy but empathy. So really just hearing what it is that you've got to say and like I said not reacting "Oh that's not real, that's not true, you shouldn't be feeling like that," because when you're in that space, you know that, but you can be so far down that none of that is helpful to hear at the moment.

Celia: How does it make you feel, thinking that your kids have depression, thinking is there something that I should have done differently?

Vicki: Yeah absolutely and I think as parents we feel incredibly responsible for our kids. I have gone to that place "what did I do wrong as a mum?" I've been through that blame and shame space but I think it's perfectly normal to do that. We do feel responsible for our kids and their wellbeing and how they cope with the world but they're responsible for the choices they've made and the way they do things. We can't be with them 24/7. I'm not in their workplace or I'm not at uni with them or whatever they're doing. So I can't be responsible for those things. There comes a point when we have to hope that we've raised them with the skills that they need to get through life.

Celia: So how do we let go of that?

Vicki: I think we just need to be kind to ourselves as parents but then do whatever we can to support them when they're in that space. Whether that means finding out more. One place I'd really recommend parents to look is Headspace:

<https://headspace.org.au/>

It's a fantastic website that is focused specifically on young people and there's so many great tools on there for parents to learn. Also just having that compassion and talking with your kids and working it out together. You can't fix it for them. They have to get to a place where they're ready.

Celia: Even with all the best efforts sometimes it feels like we can't make things better. How do you live in those spaces where you can't fix it or it's not fixed?

Vicki: I know in my own experience you know...I've got a faith, I've got an amazing life, why do I feel like this? Why can't I get off the couch? It's been days. Some people say your faith isn't strong enough. I don't agree. I have a really strong faith and I know that God was with me in those times. Through other people coming into my life, through things that I would read, I'd turn the radio on and a certain song would come on and it was like he was singing it over me. I think It's really hard.

I'm really grateful that I've had depression and I'm really grateful for the experience of walking through with my kids and my friends who have had depression because, especially for myself having depression, now I get it and I didn't before. It's not something you just pull yourself out of.

Even though I'm much better now there's still days when I feel really low but now I've learned to just accept that and just sit in that space and think about what I'm feeling and why I'm feeling it. It is really hard but there is light at the end of the tunnel. You have to believe that it will get better. That's why we all need to look out for each other and ultimately I feel like one of the most important things is we need to remain connected. While 'are you okay day' was really good I think we need to be asking that question all the time.

Celia: Earlier we talked about, as parents, how it's easy to feel that guilt and shame when things aren't going well for our kids. Have you been able to let go of that guilt and shame?

Vicki: For me this has been a process that's been happening for a long time. I had the amazing opportunity to go to Africa in 2009. The first time I'd ever left Australia to a country that's so incredibly different to the place we live in. I was incredibly vulnerable there from the minute I stepped off the plane I was pretty well petrified, people walking around with guns and all of that. We went to a youth group with a whole bunch of young adults and we had a Bible study. I just had this amazing feeling of crawling up into God's lap and sitting in it as a little child and just feeling incredibly loved.

From that moment I know that I was changed. I've been on such an amazing journey, I guess learning about myself and I guess undoing feelings of shame and guilt of things that had happened to me and choices I'd made in my life. I just feel like from that moment that it was okay. That his love and his grace and all of those things just washed over me. I think for the first time in a really long time I felt incredibly safe.

I guess those feelings we were talking before about the kids and the shame and the guilt you feel when you watch them go through hard stuff "Did I not do enough?" You still feel that but I also think that because of that amazing forgiveness that we get from Jesus, we live in his grace. I also have to give that to myself. I think as parents we need to be compassionate and graceful to ourselves because we're not perfect.

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